

The Harmony Chapter

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When Georg Henrik von Wright, in his pioneering article on the origin and composition of the *Philosophical Investigations*, raised the question of the unity of the work he asked whether the two so-called parts of the book were really meant to go together.¹ Nowadays, it seems, most people see the answer to this question more or less as von Wright himself put it at the time: what was called Part Two of the book tends to be regarded as a separate and fragmentary attempt at composing a work on the philosophy of psychology.²

The question of the unity of the book, however, retains a certain urgency, but now it tends to be asked about the formerly so-called Part I, in particular about its third third, the remarks following §421.³ When studying this material, one is inclined to wonder whether Wittgenstein had a clear idea of what he was up to or, to mention a question raised in an essay by Brian McGuinness, whether he really knew what his project was.⁴ This is a question I don't want to try to answer here. But my impression is that we have not yet found truly satisfactory ways of dealing with this material. The following observations are an attempt at suggesting a way of looking at one particular section of this material, viz. what, following Peter Hacker, I call the chapter on the harmony between language and reality, which

¹ See von Wright 1982, 135-6.

² Accordingly, the division into two parts has been given up in the new, 4th edition of *Philosophical Investigations* by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, Oxford: Blackwell, 2009. What used to be Part II is now called *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*. In this paper, quotations are taken from the new edition of the *Investigations*.

³ §421 was the last remark of the so-called *Zwischenfassung* (intermediate version) of the *Investigations*, cf. Wittgenstein 2001, 563-738.

⁴ Cf. 'Manuscripts and Works in the 1930s', in McGuinness 2002, 270-286.

comprises §§428-465.⁵ Most of these remarks belong to the earliest in the whole book, and one question which needs to be answered is why Wittgenstein made this specific selection. Again, this is a question I shan't try to answer. All I shall do is suggest a certain way of looking at the beginning of the harmony chapter, and I shall do so because I feel that this approach may be helpful in trying to arrive at a coherent reading of the rest of the chapter.

1.

My suggestion is that a useful approach to the harmony chapter is by way of tracing and keeping in mind three images. I shall now try to describe these images and to point out in which way they can serve to give this chapter a certain structure. Our three images are introduced in the first three remarks of the harmony chapter, and I feel that *this* way of looking at §§428 to 430 marks a change from previous readings of this material. I want to render plausible the view that these three remarks are a little like vague sketches that are filled in with much more precision in the sequel. That is, taken together the following remarks amplify with more detail and clearer outline what the first three remarks hint at in a more allusive way. This is remark number one:

428. "A thought – what a strange thing!" – but it does not strike us as strange when we are thinking. A thought does not strike us as mysterious while we are thinking, but only when we say, as it were retrospectively, "How was that possible?" How was it possible for a thought to deal with *this very* object? It seems to us as if we had captured reality with the thought.

The quoted words at the beginning are meant to introduce the theme of this remark, and perhaps the theme of the following remarks as well. The speaker of these words expresses surprise or wonder by saying that a thought is something 'strange'. What he finds strange is not a particular thought, but thought as a type. The speaker quoted by Wittgenstein calls thought a 'strange object' – a *seltsames Wesen*, and this word 'Wesen' is significant. Unfortunately, I see no way of rendering the peculiar quality of

⁵ Hacker 2000, Chapter 1, "Intentionality: the harmony between language and reality (§§428-65)".

the German expression which, in this context, does not make one think of the essence or nature of a kind of thing. The natural association here is with a mysterious creature, a ghost or a spectre. So, the implicit idea is that a thought, like a ghost, is an unusual creature which accomplishes what cannot easily be explained. That's why it is called strange. But the strange or ghost-like aspect does not strike us *while* this *Wesen* – this creature or object – is performing its task, while it is as it were active. It is active while we are doing something, namely, while we are thinking. But what is found strange is evidently not something *we* do in thinking a thought. Rather, what one marvels at is a strange something that does what it does without its being noticed while the process is taking place. It is only retrospectively that it is felt to be the engine driving a remarkable process. Hence, the kind of thought we are interested in must, at least to a certain degree, be independent of the process of thinking. And the aspect which concerns us is one that does not seem strange while one is thinking the thought in question. This means that the specific content of the thought is irrelevant to our considerations. After all, the specific content of a thought is something that one does quite frequently wonder about. Even WHILE I am thinking a particular thought I may ask myself why I hit on this odd idea. For example: if, while looking at a flower, I think of fried eggs and wonder whether I'd like them a little more crisp, I may well find this thought at the same time I am thinking it strange. But that is clearly not the kind of strangeness that worries the speaker quoted by Wittgenstein.

This strangeness can only emerge if we abstract, not only from the specific content of a thought, but also from the specific attitude which the thinker of that thought assumes towards it. The strangeness we are looking for is connected with the possibility of establishing a relation between thought and object – between thought and reality. But most kinds of relation that one may think of in this context can be assigned to certain categories regarding which it is not possible to talk of a relation between thought and object without supplying additional information. If I desire an ice cream, I don't establish a relation between my thought and a particular cup of ice cream, but this or that cup containing ice cream will satisfy my desire. If I doubt that world peace is at risk, I do not normally thereby establish a relation between a thought and certain people and institutions and events; but whether my thought is or is not correct will depend on the be-

haviour of certain institutions or people. If I hope that the new director of the municipal clinic will improve medical care in our town, it may look as if I had succeeded in establishing a certain relation between a thought and a specific person; but if it turns out that the clinic has been shut down, that relation apparently vanishes into thin air. Of course, all these ways of speaking can easily give rise to philosophical problems, but the decisive point is that all the information required to bring out what may be strange in this type of case plays no role as regards the strangeness intended by the speaker quoted by Wittgenstein. Evidently, the relevant relation between thought and reality belongs to a different, and perhaps more abstract, level than the attitudes of desiring, doubting or hoping just mentioned.

The achievement regarded as strange, even mysterious, by our speaker is rooted in the capacity of thought to capture the relevant part of reality. This way of putting it involves an image, but at least at first glance the image is not a particularly clear one. The reason is that “to capture” may mean different things. There is nothing unusual in saying of a photograph that it has captured a certain situation; nor in saying of a poem that it captures a certain mood; nor in saying of a novel that it captures a certain time. Presumably, what matters in such cases is that one has managed to grasp and reproduce certain typical features: the photographer has focussed on characteristic details; the poet has found words that resonate with his readers and are likely to evoke specific images in their minds; the novelist has told a tale that seems emblematic of the events and changes distinctive of a certain era. But that is not the point of this passage from *Philosophical Investigations*, for (1) the word “capture” as applied to photographers, poets, etc. and their products emphasizes the abilities of these people (and not particular features of the photograph, the poem etc.); and (2) the capturing effected by photographers or poets is not a strange or mysterious quality. I think that the image intended by Wittgenstein is indicated by Miss Anscombe’s English translation which, purely as a translation, does not seem to offer the best solution but, as an interpretation of our passage, goes in the right direction. She translates: “We feel as if by means of [thought] we had caught reality in our net.” This, I take it, is the image, Wittgenstein has in mind: A thought contains a net, a certain pattern or stencil, which helps the thinker of the thought to capture reality. The remarkable feature is this: that it is possible to capture reality by such a ghostly means, viz. by

means of a net contained in, or supplied by, thought. That this is the feature regarded as strange is confirmed by the fact that in the question “How was it possible for a thought to deal with *this very* object?” what is emphasized is “*this very* object” – *dieser Gegenstand selbst*. What is entrapped by the net is not a mere substitute but the object itself. Isn’t that strange – considering that the net consists of such delicate fabric?

2.

I think we need not try to squeeze more than that out of the first remark quoted from *Philosophical Investigations*. What we have got suffices to give us a clearer idea of the intended image and the level of abstraction on which it can exercise its evocative power. The following remark, which according to my reading contains the second image, confirms that we have found the right level. This remark runs as follows:

429. The agreement, the harmony, between thought and reality consists in this: that if I say falsely that something is *red*, then all the same, it is *red* that it isn’t. And in this: that if I want to explain the word “red” to someone, in the sentence “That is not red”, I do so by pointing to something that *is* red.

Of course, the relevant kind of agreement is not what one has in mind when talking about truth as agreement between a proposition and the reality corresponding to it, or when claiming that a proposition is true if it is in agreement with reality. This latter sort of agreement is (if one accepts this use of the word “agreement” at all) something that can be either given or lacking. Similarly with normal cases of the use of the word ‘harmony’: whether or not two voices, or parts, are in harmony depends on their mutual relations. If these relations do not satisfy certain rules of the theory of harmony, we shall claim that these voices are not in harmony. That is, a harmonious relation is given only if certain conditions are satisfied. If this is not the case, we do not speak of a relation of harmony.

In the quoted passage, on the other hand, we are dealing with a kind of harmony or agreement that always exists provided thought and reality stand in any sort of relation at all. And that is practically always the case if a thought is being thought or a proposition is being expressed. The kind of harmony that concerns us exists independently of whether the relevant thought is true or false. If we employ an analogy which Wittgenstein relies

on in his early writings when he conceives of truth and falsity as the two poles of a proposition determining its sense, we could say that the harmony in question exists even if the poles of the proposition are not orientated, that is, it exists even if the direction in which the proposition points is completely undetermined. In other words, the agreement or harmony between a thought p and reality is given no matter whether p is affirmed or denied. This sort of harmony obtains between elements or configurations of elements of the thought, on the one hand, and elements or configurations of elements of reality, on the other, but it attaches to a level which is prior to the level of affirmation and denial.

Thus there is a structural similarity between the images mentioned so far. The net of our first image captures reality no matter what attitude is assumed by the thinking subject towards objects of reality. The harmonious agreement of the second image obtains no matter whether the relevant thought is affirmed or denied. Both images rely on one and the same basic notion, viz. the Fregean idea of analysing a sentence into its propositional content, on the one hand, and the force with which this content is expressed, on the other. Wittgenstein famously elucidates this idea by means of a chemical analogy when he describes the propositional content as a “Satzradikal” – a sentence-radical. In the context of the first of our two images, the content does the job of a net capturing reality and functioning independently of the attitude assumed by the subject towards this content, that is, independently of whether his attitude is one of desire or hope, doubt or assertion. In the context of the second image, the thought or propositional content stands in a relation of harmonious agreement with reality no matter whether it is affirmed or denied, that is, no matter whether the content or the negation of this content is asserted.

3.

The third remark of our sequence continues the series of images reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s earlier writings. This remark contains two such images that are connected with each other. Wittgenstein writes:

430. “Put a ruler against this object; it does not say that the object is so-and-so long. Rather, it is in itself – I am tempted to say – dead, and achieves nothing of what a thought can achieve.” – It is as if we had imagined that the essential

thing about a living human being was the outward form. Then we made a lump of wood into that form and were abashed to see the lifeless block, lacking any similarity to a living creature.

The ruler mentioned in this passage stands for the thought or the propositional content of a sentence – what Wittgenstein calls a sentence-radical. Its gradations fit the image of a net as well as the image of harmonious agreement. In the first context, they indicate the mesh of the net; in the second context, they allude to the overlapping marks regarding which there is agreement between measure and object measured. Of course, in the *Tractatus* too the measure, or ruler – the *Maßstab*, plays an important role. There Wittgenstein compares a picture, and hence a proposition – a *Satz* – to a measure and says that a proposition is laid against reality in the same way in which a ruler is laid against an object.⁶ But now here there is an additional image that comes to the fore in our remark, namely the image of death and life.⁷ The quoted speaker says that without external help a ruler is as it were speechless and to that extent lifeless. Taken by itself, the ruler cannot specify how long objects adjacent to it are. One may even want to say that, taken by itself, it does not measure anything but merely sits there as one object among many.

What is the quoted speaker driving at? One answer that may suggest itself would take its start from the parallel with the *Tractatus* and observe that a ruler whose gradations are not correlated with determinate points in reality fails to measure anything. That is, the gradations need to be made alive, as it were, by certain correlations which turn these marks into feelers that can, and do, make contact with reality.⁸ These correlations may then be conceived as variously interpretable intentional acts that serve to breathe life into the gradation marks to enable them to accomplish what a thought (which is a live creature anyway) can pull off without such assistance. If you read the first – that is, the quoted – part of our remark this way, you may want to construe the second part as a comment by Wittgenstein, who explains to his interlocutor the kind of error he (the interlocutor) has com-

⁶ TLP, 2.1512.

⁷ Cf. Schulte 2004.

⁸ Cf. TLP, 2.1515: ‘These correlations are, as it were, the feelers of the picture’s elements, with which the picture touches reality.’

mitted. This explanation would amount to saying that he has made the mistake of taking the external form of an object for its essential part and is now attempting to capture the essential part by way of copying the object's outward form. This attempt, however, the explanation continues, will inevitably result in total failure for the reason that what is alive cannot find a satisfactory representation in what is dead.

But if you look at the matter more closely, you will find that this is all wrong. What at first blush looks like a comment by Wittgenstein is (without further qualification) complete nonsense. Whether or not a wooden artefact can get across the essential features of a human being does not depend on the artist's beliefs and theories but on his talent, his capacity to deal with this particular subject and other facts of that kind. It is obvious that dead objects can portray live creatures. These objects may even seem very much alive. One prerequisite, however, is the obtaining of pictorial conventions – conventions that people can come to master. The aliveness of certain portraits by Titian may put into the shade the aliveness of his sitters. Here, however, the word “alive” is used, not in a purely biological sense, but in a sense which is appropriate to works of art, and this sense has a lot to do with the *expressiveness* of certain forms. As a matter of fact, a lifeless block can be a splendid likeness of a living creature; it is only in the biological sense that it cannot be alive. On the other hand, in the sense in which a great work of art can be alive, a living being may look, perhaps not dead, but fairly inanimate.

Once you see what is confused about the second part of our remark, you will see more clearly what is wrong about the first – that is, the quoted – bit. Of course, in a sense the speaker is quite right in claiming that in itself a ruler does not say anything about the length of objects that are to be measured. But that is trivial. It is just as trivial as claiming that a block of wood is biologically dead. But just as a block of wood can be very much alive, as far as its expressiveness is concerned, a ruler *can* say something: it can say something whenever it is used in accordance with its intended purpose. What is interesting about the quoted speaker's statement is that he ascribes to the thought what the ruler has been denied. The thought, he says, is not dead but can off its own bat manage what the ruler cannot accomplish without assistance. But this idea is totally wrong. Here, an achievement is attributed to a thought which can only be ascribed to mem-

bers of a speech community. A thought in itself (whatever that may be) is just as dead as a ruler in itself. It is given life through being used, that is, through the role it plays in the thought of a language-using creature. If, on the other hand, by “thought” you mean mental or neural processes, they are simply irrelevant as far as ‘saying something’ is concerned. Mental or neural processes aren’t signs that can be used. For this reason, even in a metaphorical sense they are incapable of saying anything.

Still, the quoted speaker is right in saying that, taken by itself – that is, without its proper context, a ruler is dead. Life requires more than that. In our case, life presupposes the existence of a speech-community whose members have a use for such rulers; and that is a community where the employment of such rulers has been given a point by means of certain practices and conventions. Thus the third image which plays a structuring role as regards the following remarks of the harmony chapter is the contrast between dead and alive. It is, as we have seen, an image that tends to confuse readers. But if you look at our sequence from a certain perspective, you will see that the third image is closely connected with the first two. The perspective I mean is determined by a shifting and, as I should like to stress, dangerous concept – the concept of *content*.

4.

So, my claim is that the notion of content is the leitmotif of §§428ff. It sets the tone of these remarks in a way which is from the very beginning informed by the three images I have described. Here I merely wish to indicate a few aspects of the game Wittgenstein plays with his leading concept and these images. The content we are dealing with is that of statements and thoughts, expectations and desires. This content may be what is stated or thought, expected or desired, and in a sense this sort of content is a *matter of fact* or a *state of affairs* that is talked or thought about, expected or desired. But as we all know, problems arise from the fact that not everything that is asserted or thought is true, and that not all expectations and desires are fulfilled. Does that mean that in these latter kinds of case our thoughts and statements have no content? Or was it illegitimate from the start – that is, also in the case of true statements or thoughts – to ascribe content to them?

In another sense, the content of a statement or a thought is what is said or thought in contrast to the *force* with which it is stated or thought. In this sense, one and the same content can be asserted or doubted, desired or scoffed at. That this idea is not without its problems is an insight which Wittgenstein tries to express in more than one place of his writings. One problem is this: that this conception doesn't really do justice to our actual ways of thinking and talking in that the theoretical division into content and force suggests the occurrence of two different acts to which, however, nothing corresponds in reality. Another problem is that the theoretical division runs the risk of connecting the two sides – content and force – with different kinds of mental processes whose supposed existence explains nothing and which in their turn are not amenable to a satisfactory explanation.

Talk about such kinds of content becomes even more complicated if we bring in negation. If we use a sign of negation, what is negated is supposed to be the same as what is asserted by the corresponding positive proposition. There is nothing wrong about this and similar ways of putting the point, but nonetheless the basic model may be misleading, as Wittgenstein says (§447), because “the feeling is as if the negation of a proposition had first, in a certain sense, to make it true, in order to be able to negate it”. One tends to fall into this error because it is easy to overlook that “the assertions of the negating proposition contains the proposition which is negated, but not the assertion of it”.

There are two aspects of the basic idea of content which are elaborated in the harmony chapter of *Philosophical Investigations*. The first aspect concerns the *identification* of content, the second concerns its *power*. The first two images are relevant to the first aspect, the third image is connected with the second aspect. The question “How do our thoughts acquire substance?” is one whose likely answers are directed by the images of the net and of harmonious agreement to move in a certain direction. Both images suggest that it is a certain potential inherent in the conceptual scheme informing our ideas and utterances which supplies the substance enshrined in our thoughts. This conceptual scheme is supposed to see to it that thoughts and statements formed in accordance with its rules capture all the reality that does not slip through the net. In addition, the conceptual scheme is supposed to ensure that every statement and every thought

formed in accordance with its rules stands in harmonious agreement with reality. But in spite of these remarkable resources the conceptual scheme is not able to establish a connection between thought or proposition, on the one hand, and reality, on the other – a connection which suffices to restrict the domain of alternatives and to pick out or exclude exactly one or at least one among the countless chords that can count as harmonious. This kind of specification is something the conceptual scheme cannot bring about all by itself. That is why the sentence-radicals looked at in isolation seem to be lifeless, dead. Here, something needs to be added, and this additional element will surely be something mental which breathes life into the content of our thoughts and statements.

At this point, I suppose, the story begins to ring very familiar. So I stop.

Literature

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